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# Railroads of the West

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## Railroads and the West

An advertisement, an inquiry, and an answer took Levi Leonard to Pueblo, Colorado. The advertisement called for tie cutters; the inquiry was for an engineering job; and the answer invited a railroad builder to go west. The young engineer found work with a construction gang of the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad where he was assigned to the position of transit man in a crew working west of Canon City. Construction was headed up the Royal Gorge of the Arkansas River.

This was in December, 1879. "We were", states Mr. Leonard, "to run a line from the mouth of Texas Creek up Dead Horse Gulch to Silver Cliff. It was a pretty wild looking country. There were a few Ute Indians around in the mountains, and they were not kindly disposed toward the railroad. For protection we had a few extra men along who were armed. But to me the worst part of it was that I was left alone at the transit while the party was sometimes a half mile ahead."

At night, when the party made camp, they sometimes had to shovel away snow to get down to the ground. The nights were cold, and often the members of the group did not have enough



bedding to keep them warm. A few weeks was enough of that kind of work. An offer of better pay took Surveyor Leonard to Cheyenne, away from the Indians and rough mountain country.

A member of a construction party works during the day, but has a long evening to himself. He may sing or he may play cards. Leonard began to collect. His engineering training had made him methodical. Making notes by day, he wrote items at night. The folks back home would be interested. Events found their way into his notebook and into the corners of his mind. Western tales and western legends, the topography of the country and the character of the people, the drama of railroads and the vision of empire became memoranda of his daily experiences. ♦ A collector-historian must know when and where to look, and when and how to listen.

After a short stay in Cheyenne, Levi Leonard left to join a Union Pacific engineering party. He was the topographer whose duty was to make maps and profiles. Robert Blickensderfer, a son of the chief engineer, was in charge of the crew. The scene was near the North Platte River close to Fort Laramie.

The ink tracing the story of the epoch-making first transcontinental railroad was scarcely dry. Topographer Leonard began his historical observ-



ations and note taking at an opportune time. He was to know personally the men who made possible the uniting of the Atlantic and Pacific by rail. He was to interview them and to get their story. He was to realize that all great things have a human side.

Life on the plains is not always hard and lonesome: it has its humorous incidents. "Usually the first 'kick' that the boss of the party hears is about the grub", recalls Leonard. In our first party out of Cheyenne, we made camp on Chug Water Creek. We had with us a professional cook who had been on one of Uncle Sam's war vessels. Our commissary was well stocked. Nothing had been overlooked.

"One evening after a day of labor the crew was returning to camp when a black cloud appeared. It was a "Cheyenne zephyr". Within a half mile of our destination we saw the young cyclone strike camp. We saw our tent float off in the air, scattering our fine dinner all over the prairie. The cook was stamping on his white hat. We could see only the pantomime, but well did we know the cook's vocabulary — the air must have been blue around him. That was one of the most ridiculous sights I ever saw. We drove ten miles to get something to eat. His Honor the Cook was our guest." ♦  
Life is sometimes tragedy and sometimes comedy.



Presently Mr. Leonard was sent to Julesburg. It was one of the first cities of the pioneer West. When an early traveler left Omaha his destination was likely to be Julesburg. Construction officials of the first transcontinental railroad wrote to their resident engineers: "If you can not get supplies at Omaha try Julesburg." It still had the flavor of a frontier town when Mr. Leonard was there.

After finishing the running of track centers out of Julesburg, the rising engineer was called to Omaha. An assignment of constructing the Utah & Northern Railroad into Dillon, Montana, was held up by the coming of winter. He was returned to Cheyenne where he was given a "holdover" job in the freight office. Liking this work, he was given a similar position at Ogden, Utah. There he was given the freedom of staying in one place.

Plans were going forward for the construction of the great Anaconda smelter, nine miles west of Stuart in Montana. The smelter was to increase the railroad business of Stuart. When the station was enlarged, Mr. Leonard was placed in charge on April 10, 1883. This was his first opportunity to use the telegraphy he had learned in Iowa City.

◆ Our past often combines with our present to play curious tricks with our future.

It was at Stuart that Mr. Leonard met the mas-



ter mind behind the smelter. One day the "copper king" commented that the station was pretty small to handle the business. "Bring the business and we will enlarge our facilities", replied Mr. Leonard.

"I suppose you know who I am?"

"No, I'm sorry I don't."

"Well," was the hesitant reply, "I want to meet the one man in the West who doesn't know Marcus Daly."

It was the beginning of a long friendship.

A year later L. O. (as his friends called him) left the Utah & Northern Railroad and purchased the *Anaconda Review* — a newspaper which he published until 1894. He became active in public affairs, and in 1887 he was appointed general manager of the Rocky Mountain Telegraph Line. This utility, connected with the Postal Telegraph, was owned by Marcus Daly and William A. Clark. Mr. Leonard's intimate association with two of the most influential citizens in the West gave him prestige and gained for him more friends.

◆ Associates are an essential background for the many aspects of a great story.

Interest in public affairs lead Mr. Leonard into politics. At the inaugural reception of Benjamin Harrison, he represented Montana. As a boy he had worn a Lincoln badge; as a man he saw Har-



risson become President of the United States. Much history had gone into the records—the Civil War and Reconstruction. The nation was slowly maturing. Commercial interests knew no sectional bounds. East and west, north and south were united by ever expanding transportation facilities. Indeed, the amazing growth of the railroads symbolized the daring, resourcefulness, and vision of the era. Mr. Leonard well knew the part played by some of the railroad builders who contributed much toward the creation of a wealthy and united nation.

In 1885 he helped organize the Montana Press Association. He was one of the charter members; and is now one of two living members of that first group. He left the *Anaconda Review* in 1894 and took over the *Butte Mining and Railroad Review*. Politics once tasted never fails to lure, and again Mr. Leonard turned his attention to public affairs. He was sent to Washington to attend the festivities of William McKinley's inauguration. There he was commissioned as an aide on the staff of General Horace Porter who was in charge of the parade. The memory of that day is one of the most cherished of his recollections.

Mr. Leonard left newspaper work in 1894 and returned to his first love, which was railroading. From transit man, to topographer, to freight agent,



to station master, to newspaper work, then back to transportation: Leonard had squared the circle. A traveling freight agent sees his territory and he meets all classes of people. People who built railroads, people who managed railroads, and people interested in railroads passed before his view. Seeing the West recalled to Mr. Leonard old stories and unfolded new ones. He re-examined his notes: some were hard to decipher; some told of beginnings; and some recorded the development of America's mighty empire.

When his notes begged for printed expression, Mr. Leonard ventured in 1916 to publish some syndicated articles in several western newspapers. What better training could there be — a journalistic background for a railroad story by a railroad man. His knowledge of railroads and his understanding of the West came to the attention of the Union Pacific officials. A satisfactory account of the first transcontinental railroad had not yet been written. President E. E. Calvin saw the importance of such a project, and Mr. Leonard welcomed the opportunity to collect the material for a definitive history of the Union Pacific.

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